

Washington, DC— With his amendment to the fiscal year 2009 National Defense Authorization Act to improve treatment for autistic children of military families, Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07) has established a template from which to pursue the most affordable and appropriate care for those with autism. The Congressman's efforts to enact provisions to this effect into law have taken a significant step forward, as Senators Diane Feinstein (CA) and Charles Schumer (NY), with Senator Richard Durbin as an original cosponsor, have introduced corresponding language to the Senate version of the bill. The amendment allots to members of the armed forces considerably greater financial support for autistic services. —

"I am elated to have the support of Senators Feinstein, Schumer and Durbin to increase autism funding under a pay-as-you-go government," said Congressman Sestak. "A new case of an autism disorder is diagnosed every 20 minutes, affecting one in every 150 American children as the fastest-growing serious developmental disease in the United States. This legislation sets an example, through the military, of a commitment we must make to properly care for autistic children and allow them to reach their potential as contributing members of society."

Specifically, the Congressman's amendment addresses the difficulty faced by thousands of armed forces personnel and their families who are unable to obtain appropriate care for autistic children through the military's Extended Care Health Option (ECHO). With passage of this legislation, autistic children of servicemen and women can receive at least \$5,000 per month for autistic services, double the current maximum of \$2,500 per month.

Approximately 8,500 children from these families have autism; however, a recent estimate by the Congressional Budget Office shows only 700 autistic children are enrolled in ECHO because of long waits and limited coverage. ECHO's limit on autistic care allows only five hours of therapy per week, while studies by the American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Research Council show that these youth need 25 to 40 hours per week.

The Congressman's legislation serves as a guide for states currently seeking to institute autism insurance reform in the effort to compel commercial insurers to cover evidence-based, medically necessary therapies and services for individuals with autism.

Three states—South Carolina, Texas and Indiana—have already passed legislation specifically requiring private insurance companies to provide coverage of Applied Behavioral Analysis and other structured behavioral treatments. Furthermore, Autism Speaks, the nation's largest autism advocacy organization, announced recently that it will undertake a multi-state initiative to pass insurance coverage provisions for autism services.

"We cannot accept the lack of attention given to treating autism, as research nationally receives only \$80 million, or .28 percent of the National Institute of Health's research funding," said Congressman Sestak. "My amendment also calls on the Secretary of Defense to make certain that the process of determining military family eligibility for these services is conducted in an expeditious manner, and mandates a study to research the costs and benefits of covering these treatments under the military insurance's basic plan rather than under ECHO, a supplementary program. If this transition occurs, autistic children will finally receive the recommended amount of therapy."

Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "Deep Blue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the U.S. Congress.

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